THE LIFE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

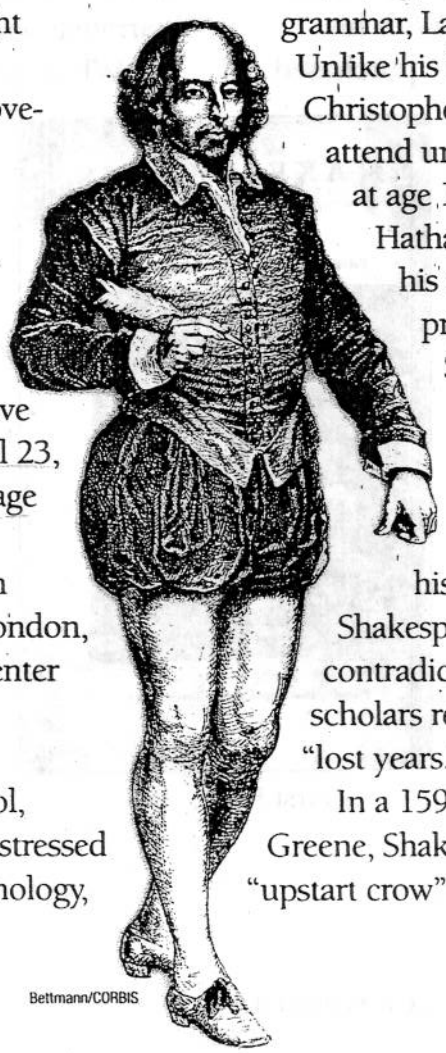
Within the class system of Elizabethan England, William Shakespeare did not seem destined for greatness. He was not born into a family of nobility or significant wealth. He did not continue his formal education at university, nor did he come under the mentorship of a senior artist, nor did he marry into wealth or prestige. His talent as an actor seems to have been modest, since he is not known for starring roles. His success as a playwright depended in part upon royal patronage. Yet in spite of these limitations, Shakespeare is now the most performed and read playwright in the world.

Born to John Shakespeare, a glovemaker and tradesman, and Mary Arden, the daughter of an affluent farmer, William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon. At that time, infants were baptized three days after their birth, thus scholars believe that Shakespeare was born on April 23, the same day on which he died at age 52. One of eight children, young William grew up in this small town one hundred miles northwest of London, far from the cultural and courtly center of England.

Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, King's New School, where the curriculum would have stressed a classical education of Greek mythology, Roman comedy, ancient history, rhetoric, grammar, Latin, and possibly Greek. Unlike his fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe, he did not attend university. Rather, in 1582 at age 18, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior and three months pregnant. Their first child, Susanna, was born in 1583, and twins, Hamnet and Judith, came in 1585. In the seven years following their birth, the historical record concerning Shakespeare is incomplete, contradictory, and unreliable; scholars refer to this period as his "lost years."

In a 1592 pamphlet by Robert Greene, Shakespeare reappears as an "upstart crow" flapping his poetic wings

An 1834 exterior view of Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon.



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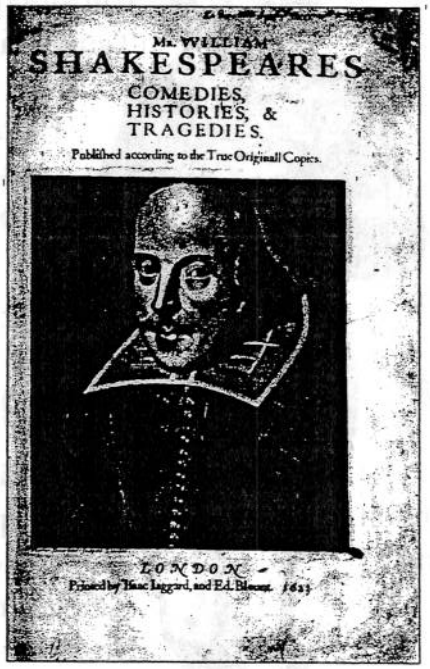
in London. Evidently, it did not take him long to land on the stage. Between 1590 and 1592, Shakespeare's *Henry VI* series, *Richard III,* and *The Comedy of Errors* were performed. When the theaters were closed in 1593 because of the plague, the playwright wrote two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece,* and probably began writing his richly textured sonnets. One hundred and fifty-four of his sonnets have survived, ensuring his reputation as a gifted poet.

Having established himself as an actor and playwright, in 1594 Shakespeare became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the most popular acting companies in London. He remained a member of this company for the rest of his career, often playing before the court of Queen Elizabeth. With his newfound success, Shakespeare purchased the second largest home in Stratford in 1597, though he continued to live in London. Two years later, he joined others from the Lord Chamberlain's Men in establishing the polygonal Globe Theatre on the outskirts of London. When King James came to the throne in 1603, he issued a royal license to Shakespeare and his fellow players, organizing them as the King's Men. During King James's reign, Shakespeare wrote many of his most accomplished plays about courtly power, including *King Lear, Macbeth,* and *Antony and Cleopatra.* In 1609, Shakespeare's sonnets were published, though he did not live to see the *First Folio* of his plays published in 1623.

In 1616, with his health declining, Shakespeare revised his will. Since his only son Hamnet had died in 1596, Shakespeare left the bulk of his estate to his two daughters, with monetary gifts set aside for his sister, theater partners, friends, and the poor of Stratford. A fascinating detail of his will is that he bequeathed the family's "second best bed" to his wife Anne. He died a month after rewriting his will. To the world, he left a lasting legacy in the form of 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and two narrative poems.

When William Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, in his birthplace of Stratford-upon-Avon, he was recognized as one of the greatest English playwrights of his era. In the four centuries since, he has come to be seen as not only a great English playwright, but the greatest playwright in the English language. Reflecting upon the achievement of his peer and sometimes rival, Ben Jonson wrote of Shakespeare, "He was not of an age, but for all time."



First Folio, *1623.*

Iambic Pentameter

Shakespeare composed much of his plays in the form of poetry, often in a meter called iambic pentameter. Even today, iambic pentameter is the most common meter used in English-language poetry. A regular line of the meter contains roughly ten syllables, with heavier stresses falling on every other syllable. An *iamb* is a metrical unit, or a "foot" of meter, made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable ("alive," "forget," "a dog"). Pentameter refers to the number of iambs in the line (*penta* is the Greek word for five, as in a pentagon). So there are five iambs in a line of iambic pentameter. *Blank verse* is unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Here are two examples from *Romeo and Juliet*: ('–' means unstressed and '/' means stressed)

– / – / – / – / – /

My *grave* is *like* to *be* my *wed*ding *bed.*

– / – / – / – / – /

But *soft,* what *light* through *yon*der *win*dow *breaks*?